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Philip Schwadel
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pschwadel2@unl.edu

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Social Class and Finding a Congregation: How Attendees are Introduced to Their Congregations

Philip Schwadel

Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 740 Oldfather Hall, P.O. Box 880324, Lincoln, NE 68588-0324, USA; *email* pschwadel2@unl.edu

Abstract
Despite the large numbers of Americans switching religious congregations each year, social scientists know relatively little about how people are introduced to new religious congregations. In this research note, I use multiple surveys of congregants—two surveys of Presbyterians in the 1990s and a survey of attendees from a random sample of congregations in 2001—to examine the effects of education and income on how attendees are introduced to their religious congregations. Results show that education and income are key predictors of how attendees find their congregations. In general, Americans with low levels of education and income are disproportionately likely to be introduced to their congregations through their social networks while those with higher levels of education and income are more likely to rely on denominational affiliation. These results address fundamental assumptions underlying theories of social class and religion and also provide religious leaders with valuable insight into the factors that influence how people are introduced to new religious congregations.

Keywords: Congregation, Social class, Education, Income

Introduction

Increases in religious switching, geographic mobility, suburbanization, and interfaith marriage, as well as other social and cultural changes, have produced a constant flow of Americans in search of a

new religious congregation. More than two-thirds of congregants have previously attended a different congregation.[1] The large number of Americans switching religious congregations brings up two important questions, both for social scientists and congregational leaders. First, what are the primary ways people are introduced to the congregations they attend? Previous research has addressed this question, showing, for example, that personal relations or social networks are often pivotal in connecting people to new religious groups (e.g. Ebaugh and Vaughn 1984; Kox et al. 1991; Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Nevertheless, less than half of all congregants first visited their congregations because they knew someone in the congregation (Bruce 2004). In addition to social networks, denomination, location, and children all play a role in introducing people to congregations (Bruce 2004). In short, there is considerable variety in the ways people are introduced to their religious congregations. Thus, the second question: what factors influence how people are introduced to their congregations? Addressing this question, I use data from multiple surveys of congregants—two surveys of Presbyterians in the 1990s and a survey of attendees from a random sample of congregations in 2001—to examine the effects of social class on how attendees are introduced to their congregations. Previous research suggests that social class— predominantly operationalized through education and income—is a key predictor of religious activities and preferences (e.g. Demerath 1965; Niebuhr 1929). Expanding on this area of research, I analyze the effects of income and education on the ways in which attendees first learned about their congregations.

Theories of the influence of social class on religion suggest a few ways in which social class may affect how people are introduced to their congregations. For instance, sociologists point to the lower-class tendency towards the emotional or experiential aspects of religion (e.g. Finney and Lee 1977; Nelson 2009), which could lead lower-class Americans to emphasize the spiritual experience and other qualities of the worship service in their search for a new congregation. The lower classes also have more religiously homogeneous social networks (Schwadel 2012; Stark 1972), regardless of the type of congregation they attend (Demerath 1965), which could mean that social networks play a larger role in finding a new congregation for lower-class

1. Based on 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey random attendees file (N = 111,438).

Americans. Conversely, advertisement by congregations should be less relevant for the lower classes since congregations appear relatively unlikely to target the poor as potential attendees (Smith 2001). Finally, the positive association between social class and strength of commitment to a denomination (Bock et al. 1983) may lead the middle and upper classes to focus more on denominational affiliation when looking for a new congregation.

Although previous research explores how social class influences whether people join a congregation (e.g. Adams and Mogey 1967; Bruce 2004), whether they leave a congregation (e.g. Scheitle and Dougherty 2010), and if they switch denominations (e.g. Sherkat and Wilson 1995), it has not examined the influence of social class on how people are introduced to their congregations. Following the work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, theories of the relationship between social class and religion suggest that middle- and upper-class congregants are attracted to different aspects of religion than are lower-class congregants (e.g. Niebuhr 1929; Stark and Finke 2000). Providing a partial test of this proposition, I examine the effects of education and income on how attendees were introduced to their religious congregations.

Data and Methods

I use data from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (US CLS) and both the 1991–1993 and 1994–1996 Presbyterian Panel Studies (PPS) to examine the effects of social class on how attendees are introduced to their congregations. The US CLS is hypersampled from the 2000 General Social Survey (U.S. Congregational Life Survey 2001). Specifically, General Social Survey respondents who attended religious services at least once in the previous year supplied the name of their primary places of worship, which produced a nationally representative, random sample of congregations. The US CLS random attendees' survey, which is employed in the analysis below, was administered to all attendees at participating congregations during the last weekend of April, 2001.[2] Thirty-six percent of the 1,214 congregations contacted

2. The variable indicating attendance at a Catholic Church comes from the US CLS random profile survey, which was completed by a key informant in each congregation.

returned survey responses from attendees (see Woolever and Bruce 2002 for more information on the US CLS data). Unfortunately, the question about how attendees were introduced to their congregations was administered to only a subset of respondents, resulting in a sample of 626 after deleting cases with missing data.[3]

Thus, I also examine combined data from two independently sampled panels of the PPS (N = 3,283).[4] The PPS samples members, elders, pastors, and other clergy in Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations, though only the member and elder data are used in the analysis below. The panels are re-sampled every three years. The member samples are derived from proportional stratified samples of congregations, within which random samples of members are drawn. The elder samples are proportional random samples from a list of elders maintained by the Presbyterian Church (USA). Response rates range from 68 to 73% [see Research Services, Presbyterian Church (USA) 1991, 1994 for more information on the PPS]. To adequately address the effects of education, the US CLS and PPS samples are limited to respondents at least 25 years old.

Two dependent variables assess how attendees were introduced to their congregations. First, the PPS asked respondents who were not raised in their current congregation what the most important factor was in introducing them to their congregation.[5] Table 1 reports

3. Eighty-five percent of US CLS respondents received the standard survey. The remaining 15% of respondents received 15 different ''back page'' forms. There are some meaningful differences between the entire US CLS sample and the subset of respondents who received the ''back page'' form that included the question on how respondents were introduced to their congregations. Most notably, respondents who received the ''back page'' form with the question about being introduced to the congregation are relatively highly educated (44% have a Bachelor's degree, versus 38% for whole US CLS), relatively likely to attend an evangelical Protestant Church (24 versus 17% for the whole US CLS), relatively likely to attend a mainline Protestant Church (24 versus 19% for entire US CLS), and relatively unlikely to attend a Catholic Church (50 versus 59% for the whole US CLS).
4. There were more than 3.5 million members and over 11,400 congregations in the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1990 (based on 1990 Church and Church Membership in the United States data; reports and full data available at the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.theARDA.com). Although unlikely, it is possible for the same individual to be sampled in both the 1991–1993 and 1994–1996 PPS.
5. The variable is recoded so the ''more than one of the above'' option, which was only available in the 1994–1996 survey, is coded as ''other.'' The 1% of respondents who chose the ''charter member'' option are also added to the ''other'' category.

Table 1. How attendees are introduced to their congregations, 1991–1993 and 1994–1996 Presbyterian Panel Study and 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey.

	Percent of respondents
PPS	
Looking for Presbyterian Church	33.0
Introduced by friend	21.4
Introduced by relative	12.6
Looking for nearby church	10.6
Heard or read about church	10.5
Pastor visited or called	8.8
Other	3.2
US CLS	
Invited	39.3
Local congregation in denomination	17.9
Noticed as passed by	10.6
Advertisement	4.7
Child care	4.5
Exposure to congregation	3.9
Through another congregation	2.8
Other/cannot remember	16.3

PPS *N* = 3,283; US CLS *N* = 626

the percent of respondents in each response category. The most common response was looking for a Presbyterian congregation, accounting for a third of respondents. The next two largest response categories both reflect being introduced to congregations through social connections—21% of respondents said a friend (or neighbor or acquaintance) who is a member introduced them to their congregation, and 13% said a relative who is a member introduced them to their congregation. Next, over 10% were looking for a nearby church (regardless of denomination) and about the same proportion heard or read about the congregation. Finally, almost 9% were introduced to their congregation because the pastor visited or called, and 3% were introduced to their congregation for other reasons.

The second dependent variable comes from the US CLS. Respondents were asked how they first found out about the congregation they were attending. To make the dependent variables from the PPS and US CLS comparable, 52 respondents who attended their congregations since they were children were deleted from the US CLS sample. Similar to the PPS, the most common way US CLS respondents were introduced to their congregations was through someone they knew (39%) or because it was the local congregation in their denomination (18%). Almost 11%

of attendees reported noticing the congregation as they passed by. Less than 5% of attendees chose each of the following responses: found the congregation through advertisement (received a letter or pamphlet, saw it in the yellow pages, or noticed a television, radio, or newspaper advertisement), because their child attended day care or other programs at the congregation, though participation in another congregation, or because they were exposed to the congregation through other sources (through a wedding, funeral, baptism, community group meeting, or by invitation from a stranger). Finally, 16% of attendees either could not remember how they found out about the congregation or they were introduced to the congregation for some other reason. It is important to note that both the dependent variable from the PPS and the dependent variable from the US CLS measure how congregants were first introduced to their congregations, not how first time visitors find out about a congregation. None of the respondents are first time visitors to their congregations.[6] All of the PPS respondents are either elders or members in their churches. Among the US CLS respondents, 97% report attending at least once a month and 84% are members.

The primary independent variables measure education and income (means of all independent variables reported in Table 2). Family income is measured with dummy variables for less than $25,000, $25,000–$49,999, $50,000–$99,999, and $100,000 or more. In the PPS model, education is measured with dummy variables for those with no high school degree, a high school degree, some college, a college degree, and any graduate school. Due to the smaller sample size and associated power problems, in the US CLS model education is assessed with a single dichotomous variable indicating college graduates. Several control variables that are associated with both religion and social class are included in the models (Finney and Lee 1977; Stark and Finke 2000). Specifically, all models control for age, sex, race, marital status, and children.[7] The PPS model also controls for status

6. Twenty-three US CLS respondents who report being first time visitors were deleted from the sample.

7. Both models include dummy variables for nonwhite, female, and currently married respondents. In the US CLS model, age is coded in years of age and the presence of children is measured with a variable indicating respondents with children in the home. Preliminary analyses revealed no nonlinear age effects. In the PPS model, age is assessed with dummy variables coded in ten-year increments, and the presence of children is measured with a variable indicating respondents with children under the age of 18.

Table 2. Means of independent variables.

	PPS	*US CLS*
No high school degree	0.03	–
High school degree	0.13	–
Some college	0.22	–
College degree	0.25	–
Any grad school	0.38	–
College degree dummy	–	0.43
<$25,000	0.16	0.20
$25,000–$49,999	0.34	0.28
$50,000–$99,999	0.38	0.36
$100,000?	0.12	0.17
Age 25–34	0.07	–
Age 35–44	0.22	–
Age 45–54	0.22	–
Age 55–64	0.23	–
Age 65–74	0.19	–
Age 75+	0.08	–
Age	–	53.14 (14.90)
Female	0.52	0.62
Nonwhite	0.05	0.19
Married	0.85	0.74
Children	0.33	0.58
Catholic	–	0.50
South	0.30	–
Elder	0.49	–

PPS N = 3,283; US CLS N = 626; standard deviation in parentheses.

as a church elder and being in the southern Census region, and the US CLS model also controls for attending a Catholic Church.[8]

Due to the nominal nature of the dependent variables, I use multinomial logistic regression models to examine the effects of education and income on how attendees were introduced to their congregations.

8. The US CLS data do not include a measure of region. Among US CLS respondents, 51% attend Catholic Churches, 24% attend evangelical Protestant Churches, 23% attend mainline Protestant Churches, 1% attend black Protestant Churches, and 2% attend congregations affiliated with other religions (based on religious classification of Steensland et al. 2000). The small sample size combined with an eight-category dependent variable precludes including a series of religious tradition dummy variables. I include a variable denoting attendees of Catholic Churches because Catholics should be disproportionately likely to emphasize denominational affiliation—exemplified by their relative reluctance to switch to other religious affiliations (Sherkat and Wilson 1995)—and because the relatively large number of Catholic respondents provides stable estimates.

Multinomial logistic regression models report the effects of independent variables on the logged odds or risk of falling into various categories of the dependent variable, relative to the reference category of the dependent variable (Hosmer and Lemeshow 2000). Looking for a congregation in a specific denomination, which is a frequently chosen option in both surveys, is the reference category. Analyses of the US CLS data are weighted to adjust for congregation size and non-response.

Results

Table 3 reports results from a multinomial logistic regression of how respondents were introduced to their congregations using the PPS data. The result show the effects of independent variables on the relative risk of various ways of being introduced to a congregation, compared to being introduced to the congregation because the respondent was looking for a Presbyterian (USA) Church. A coefficient above one indicates a positive effect while a coefficient below one indicates a negative effect.

The first two columns of Table 3 show that education, and to a lesser extent income, have strong, negative effects on being introduced to the congregation through friends or relatives. For instance, the relative risk of being introduced to the congregation through a friend rather than because they were looking for a Presbyterian Church is 42% lower for college graduates than for high school graduates (0.58 – 1 = –0.42). Similarly, the risk of being introduced to the congregation through a relative is 43% less for college graduates than for high school graduates. Education also has a strong, negative effect on being introduced to the congregation through a visit or call from the pastor. The relative risk of being introduced to a congregation because the pastor visited or called is 53% less for college educated Presbyterians than it is for high school educated Presbyterians. In addition to negatively affecting Presbyterians' likelihood of being introduced to their congregations through social networks and visits from the pastor, income has a negative effect on looking for a nearby congregation and, for the highest income category, a positive effect on hearing or reading about the congregation. Specifically, Presbyterians with family incomes over $100,000 have a relative risk of being introduced to a congregation because they were looking for a nearby

Table 3. Relative risk ratios from multinomial logistic regression of how attendees are introduced to their congregations (reference = "looking for a Presbyterian Church"), 1991–1993 and 1994–1996 Presbyterian Panel Study.

	Introduced by friend Exp(B)	*Introduced by relative Exp(B)*	*Looking for nearby congregation Exp(B)*	*Heard or read about church Exp(B)*	*Pastor visited or called Exp(B)*	*Other Exp(B)*
No H.S. degree	0.53	1.15	1.39	1.19	0.95	1.11
H.S. degree	–	–	–	–	–	–
Some college	0.68*	0.51***	0.80	1.42	0.72	0.58†
College degree	0.58**	0.57**	0.95	1.40	0.47***	0.54†
Any grad school	0.61**	0.33***	0.92	1.18	0.44***	0.63
<$25,000	1.07	1.10	0.98	1.24	1.15	1.41
$25,000–$49,999	–	–	–	–	–	–
$50,000–$99,999	0.77*	0.59***	0.75†	0.94	0.70*	0.71
$100,000+	0.85	0.62*	0.62*	1.54*	0.78	0.80
Age 25–34	2.64***	3.26***	1.45	2.02†	0.86	0.78
Age 35–44	2.51***	3.48***	2.51**	2.80**	0.86	0.70
Age 45–54	2.02**	2.59***	2.17*	2.08*	0.90	0.54
Age 55–64	1.65*	2.29**	1.76†	1.56	1.30	0.91
Age 65–74	1.31	1.52	1.30	1.31	1.00	0.91
Age 75+	–	–	–	–	–	–
Female	0.87	0.97	0.89	0.97	0.76†	1.33
Nonwhite	1.37	1.27	0.84	1.27	1.15	1.17
South	0.95	0.90	0.77†	0.87	0.96	1.32
Elder	0.95	1.03	0.96	0.69**	0.96	0.68†
Married	0.68*	1.06	0.92	0.83	0.88	0.95
Children under 18	1.18	1.26	1.69**	1.22	1.45	0.78
Intercept	0.89	0.38**	0.24***	0.17***	0.62	0.23**

N = 3,283
† $P \leq 0.1$; * $P \leq 0.05$; ** $P \leq 0.01$; *** $P \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests)

congregation that is 38% lower than the relative risk for those with family incomes between $25,000 and $49,999, and their relative risk of being introduced to a congregation because they heard or read about it is 54% greater than the relative risk for those with family incomes between $25,000 and $49,999.

Along with education, age is the strongest predictor in the model. Age has a significant, negative effect on four of the six response options in Table 3, indicating that older Presbyterians are relatively likely to be introduced to their congregations because they are looking for a Presbyterian Church. In general, the results in Table 3 suggest that Presbyterians with higher levels of education and income

are disproportionately likely to be introduced to their congregations because they are looking for a Presbyterian (USA) Church, and those with lower levels of education and income are disproportionately likely to be introduced to their congregations through friends and relatives.

Table 4 reports results from a multinomial logistic regression of how respondents were introduced to their congregations using the US CLS data. Supporting the results from the PPS model, the US CLS model shows that education is negatively associated with being introduced to a congregation because someone the respondent knew invited him or her, though income does not have a meaningful impact on this response category. The relative risk of being introduced to a congregation because a person the respondent knew invited him or her is 36% less for college graduates than for those without a college degree. The US CLS results also show that both education and income have negative effects on being introduced to the congregation through child care or other programs for children. Additionally, respondents in the highest income category are relatively unlikely to report being introduced to their congregation because they noticed it as they passed by, and they are relatively unlikely to choose the other/cannot remember option.

Similar to the PPS model, age has a negative effect on five of the seven response options in the US CLS model, indicating that older congregants tend to be introduced to their congregations because they are looking for a local congregation in their denomination. It is important to note, however, that models based on nonrepeated, cross-sectional data cannot distinguish age effects from birth cohort effects. It is possible that older generations, rather than older Americans in general, are relatively likely to emphasize the importance of denominational affiliation. This interpretation fits with the disproportionately high levels of religious switching among younger generations (Sherkat 1991). The US CLS model also shows that Catholics are relatively unlikely to report being introduced to their congregations through an invitation, another congregation, noticing the congregation as they passed by, or exposure from other sources. Thus, Catholics are relatively likely to find their churches due to the denominational affiliation of the church.[9] Overall, results from both the PPS and US CLS models show

9. An alternative model, with a dummy variable for evangelical Protestants instead of a variable for Catholics, suggests that evangelical Protestants are disproportionately likely to be introduced to their congregations through invitation or exposure from other sources.

Table 4. Relative risk ratios from multinomial logistic regression of how attendees are introduced to their congregations (reference = local congregation in denomination), 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey.

	Invited Exp(B)	*Noticed as passed by Exp(B)*	*Advertise-ment Exp(B)*	*Child care Exp(B)*	*Through another congreg. Exp(B)*	*Exposure Exp(B)*	*Other/ cannot remember Exp(B)*
College degree	0.64†	0.71	0.88	0.29*	0.43	0.92	0.72
<$25,000	1.86	0.71	0.86	3.10†	0.69	3.18	1.36
$25,000–$49,999	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
$50,000–$99,999	1.11	0.71	0.51	1.93	2.34	2.55	0.95
$100,000+	0.61	0.45†	0.40	0.54	2.37	1.79	0.41*
Age	0.96***	0.96***	0.95**	0.96*	1.03	1.00	0.97*
Female	1.07	0.95	1.95	1.12	0.56	1.31	1.36
Nonwhite	1.29	0.75	0.40	1.28	0.57	4.78**	0.58
Married	0.67	0.99	1.12	0.55	1.23	0.76	0.90
Children in home	1.09	0.80	0.66	1.25	4.36*	0.93	1.13
Catholic	0.23***	0.55†	0.73	0.79	0.32*	0.12***	0.97
Intercept	59.23***	17.02**	8.02	2.74	0.02†	0.24	5.13†

$N = 626$
† $P \leq 0.1$; * $P \leq 0.05$; ** $P \leq 0.01$; *** $P \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests)

that income and education are negatively associated with being introduced to a religious congregation though social connections, and positively associated with being introduced to a congregation due to the denominational affiliation of the congregation.

Conclusions

Since Niebuhr's (1929) research on denominationalism in the United States, social scientists have acknowledged the class-specific appeal of different religious institutions. Contemporary research continues to suggest that middle-class Americans and lower-class Americans are drawn to different aspects of religion (e.g. Nelson 2009; Schwadel 2008; Stark and Finke 2000). Extending this area of research, I analyze the effects of income and education on how attendees are introduced to their religious congregation. The above results demonstrate that education and income are both associated with how people are introduced to their congregations. Along with age, education appears to be one of the strongest predictors of how people find their

congregations. Consequently, in addition to being relatively likely to participate in religious congregations (Schwadel 2011), highly educated Americans find their congregations through different ways than do those with lower levels of education.

Substantively, the results suggest that denominational affiliation plays a large role in how middle- and upper-class congregants find their congregations while social networks are pivotal to introducing lower-class congregants to their congregations. Both the PPS and US CLS data demonstrate that highly educated and higher income congregants are relatively likely to say that denominational affiliation was the primary reason they were introduced to their congregations. This finding comports with research that shows that social class has a positive effect on strength of commitment to a denomination (e.g. Bock et al. 1983). High levels of geographic mobility among the middle and upper classes may also play a role in these findings. When moving to a new community, denominational affiliation may be the most relevant criteria for choosing a congregation, particularly for those lacking established social networks. In regards to social networks, the results show that income and especially education negatively affect being introduced to a congregation through friends or relatives. This finding may be associated with the high levels of religious homophily in lower-class social networks (Demerath 1965; Schwadel 2012; Stark 1972). In other words, lower-class Americans may be more likely to rely on friends and relatives to introduce them to new congregations because they know their friends and relatives have religious beliefs similar to their own, though additional research is needed to test this proposition. Results from analysis of the PPS data also show that highly educated Presbyterians are particularly unlikely to have been visited or contacted by their pastor. In contrast, Smith (2001) finds that residents of low-income housing projects are relatively unlikely to be contacted by churches. Of course, both Smith's analysis, which focused on housing projects in a single city, and the above analysis of the PPS data, which is based on attendees of Presbyterian (USA) Churches, are limited in their generalizability. Additional research is needed to examine how the relationship between social class and being contacted by a congregation varies across regions and religious contexts.

While the above results provide insight into the factors that influence how attendees are introduced to their religious congregations, there are several important limitations to this analysis. First, the PPS

data are limited in their generalizability because all the respondents attend Presbyterian (USA) Churches while the US CLS data are limited by a relatively small sample size. Second, the above analysis addresses how congregants learned about their congregations, not necessarily why they chose to continue attending. Additional research is needed to explore the factors that lead visitors to continue attending a congregation. Third, the above analysis employs samples of congregants. Future research can add to these results by examining how visitors to a congregation learn about the congregation, regardless of whether or not they choose to continue attending. Fourth, while this research note focuses on demographic factors—particularly income and education—that influence how congregants are introduced to their congregations, beliefs and values are also likely to have a large impact. Examining the influence of beliefs and values would probably require longitudinal data to ensure that the beliefs and values precede being introduced to the congregation.

Although contemporary research assumes that social class influences the types of religious institutions Americans are drawn to (e.g. Nelson 2009; Stark and Finke 2000), empirical analyses have largely ignored the relationship between social class and the congregations people attend. Instead, empirical research on social class and religious affiliation has relied on measures of denominational affiliation (Sherkat and Wilson 1995). As the above findings show, social class is strongly associated with how attendees were introduced to their congregations. This information is not only relevant to social scientific research but also to religious leaders. In a competitive religious marketplace (Stark and Finke 2000), congregational leaders can benefit from knowledge of the factors that influence how Americans are introduced to their religious congregations. This research note shows that social class is a strong predictor of how people learn about their religious congregations, suggesting that congregations that want to compete for new members must tailor their appeal to different social class constituencies.

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